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SUBJECT: SANCTUARY AND ECONOMIC HARDSHIP FOR ARMENIA'S
YEZIDI/KURDISH MINORITY

REF: A) YEREVAN 723 B) YEREVAN 528 C) YEREVAN 274 D) 06 YEREVAN 1484

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Numbering 40,000, the Yezidi minority in Armenia has found sanctuary as well as economic hardship since taking refuge in Russian Armenia in the 1830s. Based on fieldwork by Dr. Mark Yoffe, a George Washington University researcher participating in the U.S. Embassy Policy Specialist Program, Armenia's Yezidis espouse few nationalistic or political aspirations, favor integration in Armenian society, and seek a better economic future for their youth. At the same time, Yezidis take pains to preserve their culture, traditions, and religion, and care about the plight of their brethren caught in the crossfire in Iraq. While Yezidis acknowledge the presence of the terrorist PKK in Armenia and some express sympathy for the group, PKK support is confined to small pockets of the Yezidi population, and its depth is marginal. End summary.

CRISIS OF IDENTITY: KURDISH OR YEZIDI?

2. (SBU) In the last Soviet census conducted in 1989, out of approximately 60,000 Kurds who had been formerly identified as living in Armenia, 52,700 for the first time were given a new official status as Yezidis. The 2001 census performed in Armenia put the number of Yezidis and Kurds in Armenia at 40,620 and 1,519 respectively. These Kurds practice the Yezidi faith rather than Islam. According to data Yoffe has collected in country, the number of Armenian Kurds who are practicing Muslims has steadily dwindled over the years, to below 100. Yezidis are not Muslims, although like their Kurdish brethren in Armenia speak the same dialect of Kurdish (Kurmanji). Yezidis, however, use the Cyrillic alphabet to write what they refer to as the "Yezidi" language, while Kurds here use the Latin alphabet to write in Kurdish. (Note: Armenian passports currently recognize and list Yezidi as a nationality. End note.)

3. (SBU) According to Yoffe, who for the past month has visited some of the most populous Kurdish Yezidi areas in Armenia, most Yezidis in Armenia are offended when identified as Kurds. This resentment

stems from religious persecution Yezidis historically suffered at the hands of Muslims - Kurds and Turks alike. Yoffe stated that increasing attacks on Yezidis in northern Iraq, allegedly by Muslim Kurds, has intensified this resentment. (Note: Yezidis are reported to number 1.5 million worldwide, with 800,000 to 1.2 million living in Iraq. End note.) Yoffe said Yezidis in Armenia likewise still harbor ill will toward Sunni Arabs in Iraq as a result of Saddam Hussein's 1988 gassing of Kurds that claimed Yezidi lives as well.

THE PASTORAL EXISTENCE OF YEZIDIS

14. (SBU) Yezidis lead a largely pastoral life in low-lying villages around Mount Aragats in western Armenia, where they eke out a hardscrabble living through animal husbandry and subsistence agriculture. They summer their cattle and sheep in the Aragats highlands. Yezidis generally reside in either villages all their own or ethnically mixed villages alongside poor rural Armenians. They often barter their agricultural production amongst themselves and with Armenian neighbors.

SANCTUARY, UNDERSTANDING, LOYALTY IN ARMENIA

15. (SBU) Yoffe says Yezidis began to appear in Russian Armenia in the 1830s, during the tumult of Russian-Turkish wars, as a result of religious persecution suffered at the hands of Turks and Muslim Kurds. Muslim disdain for the pagan, sun-worshipping practices of Yezidis drove the latter into Armenia, where they were allowed to observe their faith unmolested. (Note: The Yezidi religion is a complex, syncretic faith that contains elements of Sufi Islam, Shiite tenets, and Shamanism that historically has been influenced by Judaism and Christianity as well. End note.)

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16. (SBU) This centuries-long sanctuary appears to have endeared the Yezidis to Armenia, and engendered an enduring loyalty. During an interview with the noted Yezidi religious and intellectual figure Hassan Tamoyan, who anchors the popular weekly TV program, "Minorities of Armenia," Tamoyan stated that when one looks around, "there is no better place on the map" for Yezidis than Armenia. A middle-aged Yezidi language teacher told Yoffe during a visit to his village that besides Armenia "we have nowhere else to go."

17. (SBU) Yezidis also appear to be proud of their history as brothers-in-arms to Armenians. During visits to primary schools in multiple Yezidi villages, Yoffe and Yoffe saw some of the new Yezidi-language textbooks which are being introduced in Armenia. In the second grade reader one can find a section on the 31 Yezidi "heroes" who died fighting alongside Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Yoffe reports that a monument dedicated to joint resistance to Turkish forces at the turn of the 20th century by Armenians and Yezidis was erected in a Yezidi village on Armenian's border with Turkey. (Note: This history does not prevent some Yezidi youth from being as eager as their Armenian neighbors to avoid the present-day military draft, whose hardships offer little attraction. End note.)

ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

18. (SBU) Yezidis suffer the same kind of economic woes as Armenia's rural poor: dilapidated - or an absence of - basic infrastructure (water, gas, telephone); difficult access to markets for their agricultural output; no processing facilities for their dairy and animal products; exploitation by unscrupulous middlemen; low level of education; and the socio-economic burden of early marriages and large families.

19. (SBU) Leaders such as Tamoyan from Yerevan, and the bombastic though unrelated Aziz Tamoyan from the village of Zovuni both told Yoffe

that Yezidis' most pressing needs are economic. Living like poor rural Armenians in ramshackle dwellings, young Yezidis' only hope for a better standard of living is via integration in Armenian society. Although both Tamoyans are strong proponents of preserving Yezidi culture, they stated that Yezidi youth must be educated in, and learn to speak, Armenian language to move beyond peasant status. Yezidi villagers whom poloff met in the Talin region echoed the sentiments of the Tamoyans, and one wife of a Yezidi village head complained her husband would not allow her family to move to Yerevan for a better life.

¶10. (SBU) In trying to understand Yezidi emigration, mainly to western Europe, Yoffe came across anecdotal reports of Yezidis claiming discrimination in Armenia to bolster their political asylum cases. He also heard of reports of ethnic Armenians posing as "oppressed" Yezidis, again a ploy to seek a better economic future abroad. Yoffe heavily discounted these reports, based on his extensive observations of harmonious Yezidi-Armenian relations, and observed neither racism nor social ostracism of Yezidis during his field research. Russia was also a common destination for economic migrants; the Yezidis' Armenian citizenship and Russian language proficiency make Russia an easy destination.

LACK OF POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS OR ANIMOSITY

¶11. (SBU) At present there are no Yezidis in elected office at the national level, though Aziz Tamoyan - the dubiously self-proclaimed leader of Yezidis worldwide - ran and lost a parliamentary race. According to Yoffe, Hassan Tamoyan refuses to run for parliament in spite of the fact he has previously been nominated. The latter told Yoffe that he does not want to "turn the nationality issue into a political" one. Tamoyan also stated that while Yezidis seek no special privileges from the Armenian authorities, neither are any given. According to Yoffe, the Yezidi Diaspora is nascent, without means, uneducated, and wields little influence over Yezidis in Armenia. (Note: Yoffe is researching the question of special privileges for Yezidis, but so far has heard only anecdotal evidence of its existence. Both Yoffe and poloff were struck, however, by the educational resources at their disposal. In several villages, three schools serving between 20-40 Yezidi children total each had six-eight, mostly Armenian, faculty. End note.)

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¶12. (SBU) As a researcher with ethnographic studies experience, Yoffe reports he has been taken aback by the absence of animosity toward Armenia and by the apparent "our lot is their lot" attitude that Yezidis espouse. Yoffe says he regularly hears Yezidis refer to Armenian neighbors as "brothers and sisters," and at the wake for a Yezidi man he attended, numerous Yezidi-speaking Armenian neighbors also paid their respects. Yoffe reports also having met Armenian mayors or village leaders who speak Yezidi.

PRESERVING YEZIDI CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

¶13. (SBU) In spite of their political passivity, Yezidis take pains to preserve their culture, traditions, and religion. Aziz Tamoyan is working to introduce new Yezidi textbooks into the elementary curriculum in Yezidi areas, and Hassan Tamoyan uses the airwaves - TV and radio - to propagate Yezidi culture, history and religion. According to Yoffe, there are also half a dozen Yezidi language newspapers (weeklies and monthlies) that are produced in Yerevan and distributed to Yezidi villages. Several of the Yezidi villagers told poloff they follow closely Yezidi news, especially after the August attack in northern Iraq which claimed Yezidi lives.

¶14. (SBU) Observance of Yezidi religious practices, and respect for the three-tiered caste religious system is a central part of Yezidi life. Sheikhs, peers, and murids (laymen) - all men - pray several times a day, participate in religious ceremonies as professions of their faith, and carry certain rights and responsibilities within Yezidi society. Villagers whom poloff met said they regularly observed their faith, which constitutes a core pillar of Yezidi

life, and one woman showed poloff her household's prayer altar. Sheikhs, the highest caste, are traditionally considered both religious and secular leaders, and are responsible for leading community prayers and assemblies. Peers are a hereditary priestly class one rung lower than sheikhs, and may lead community services when no sheikh is available.

THE ROLE OF GENDER: WOMEN PLAY A TRADITIONAL ROLE

¶15. (SBU) Yezidi women lead a conservative, traditional lifestyle as hard-working homemakers who tend to their usually older husbands and large number of offspring. They rarely if ever do fieldwork or care for animals, which is normally left to men. They also eat separately after serving their spouses and families. Although divorce exists in Yezidi culture, and Yezidis are not prohibited from marrying non-Yezidis, social estrangement by families can ensue in such cases. One villager told poloff that outside marriages "brought curses" to the Yezidi household. While Yezidis respect women's standing in society, Yezidi women in reality have little opportunity for social-economic advancement.

¶16. (SBU) Yoffe learned that in Yezidi villages, girls are frequently pulled out of school by the eighth grade to be prepared for marriage by their mid-teens. This violates Armenian law, but in small, remote villages local officials can generally be persuaded to look the other way. For this reason, rural Yezidis have generally resisted GOAM initiatives to build larger, more centralized schools which would offer better facilities and bus in students from surrounding villages. The concern is that officials running such a school would be more aggressive about requiring attendance through the legally-required age.

MARGINAL SUPPORT OF KURDISH NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

¶17. (SBU) While neither Yoffe nor poloff noted any visible manifestations of support for Kurdish nationalist movements abroad, Yezidi and Armenian interlocutors acknowledged the presence of the PKK (KGK) in Armenia. Pro-PKK sympathies appear to be confined geographically, however, by village, and their depth marginal. In Yeraskhaun, due west of Yerevan in the Armavir region, Yezidis claimed they had refused advances by PKK militants offering financial and material assistance (ostensibly in exchange for loyalty to the Kurdish cause). Ethnic Armenian directors of Yezidi schools in the villages of Gialto and Hakko located near Talin acknowledged that past visits to the area by PKK militants bearing assistance had taken place. But both doubted whether this

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assistance yielded any PKK loyalties, with one joking that in these cases the Yezidis "were Kurds during the day, and Yezidis again the next morning." Between them both, only one knew - in their combined 30 years of residence in the area - of a single case of a Yezidi youth going to "serve the struggle" in Turkey. And neither had ever heard of wounded PKK militants seeking medical treatment in the area.

¶18. (SBU) Yoffe reports that Yezidis who reside in suspected pro-PKK areas have been coy about any leanings. Many of these have denied links, or declared that PKK militants are neither popular nor welcome in Yezidi villages. However, others have openly admitted the visits of PKK militants and even their leaders in the past. Yoffe was also told that one of the Yezidi newspapers circulating in Armenia is allegedly funded by the PKK, though Hassan Tamoyan stated he "chases away" funding offers from the PKK. For his part, Yoffe heard of no reports of wounded PKK militants seeking medical care in Armenia.

¶19. (SBU) When asked about the apparent contradiction in Yezidis' contempt for Muslim Kurds and some Yezidis' sympathy for the PKK cause, Yezidis and Armenian scholars answered differently. Armenian scholars stated that the PKK's non-religious banner enabled Yezidis to support their territorial struggle. Yezidis who answered

the question, usually indirectly, intimated that they can relate to the Kurds' feeling of having no homeland. This sense of being dispossessed of a land all their own appears to resonate keenly with Yezidis here.

KURDISTAN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

¶20. (SBU) Yoffe also heard conspiracy theories within the Yezidi community that the PKK in the long-term eyes Yezidi lands in Armenia as part of a greater Kurdistan. The thinking apparently goes that if "our people" live there now, it will be "our land" when the day comes to found a new state. Concomitantly, the attempts to destabilize Yezidi lands in northern Iraq are part of a long-term strategy to force Yezidis into Turkey and then into Armenia, thus adding new foot soldiers to the Kurdistan cause. Another conspiratorial view sees Yezidis holding out in Iraq and approaching the U.S. government to support the eventual founding of a Yezidi homeland.

COMMENT

¶21. (SBU) Yoffe's research has given post a clearer view of the Yezidi population in Armenia. In general, the Yezidis share the fate of rural Armenians struggling in new economic times. Clinging to their cultural traditions and pastoral ways, rather than their minority status, appears to be the principal cause of their socio-economic woes. Although Yezidis lament not having a state of their own, as evidenced by pockets of sympathy for a greater Kurdistan, Armenia continues to provide Yezidis a stable refuge in which they can openly practice their way of life.

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